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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000131

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#)  
SUBJECT: 40 DAYS TO ELECTION DAY: PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRATIC  
CHANGE REMAIN IFFY

REF: MINSK 108

Classified By: Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: With presidential elections only a month and a half away, the campaign "process" is well underway, but more in form than substance. Incumbent President Lukashenko, 10 Coalition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich, former Belarusian State University rector Anatoly Kozulin, and pro-Lukashenko Liberal Democratic Party leader Sergey Gaidukevich remain the most likely candidates. However, most Belarusians hardly feel presidential elections are just around the corner, given the calculated lack of information reaching the public about any of the candidates or issues but Lukashenko and his successes. Recognizing its chances of dislodging Lukashenko are slim, the opposition hopes these elections will help expand their base of support and encourage more Belarusians to defend their political freedoms. But most Belarusians appear apathetic or even satisfied with the regime's economic policies. Still, polls show a significant number of Belarusians would prefer an alternative to Lukashenko if one existed. But, so far, one has not appeared. Lukashenko's support remains substantial but could be vulnerable to unexpected events. Russian support remains key but underlying economic weaknesses threaten Lukashenko's long-term hold on Belarus. End Summary.

#### 40 Days Out, Opposition Making Itself Known

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¶2. (C) President Lukashenko, 10 Coalition candidate and NGO leader Aleksandr Milinkevich, former Belarusian State University rector Anatoly Kozulin, and pro-Lukashenko MP Sergey Gaidukevich recently submitted the minimum number of signatures of voter support to contest the March presidential elections (reftel). Central Election Committee (CEC) officials announced they will verify the signatures and register the candidates by February 19. (Note: Milinkevich and Kozulin defied expectations and exceeded the 100,000 signature threshold, but their campaign leaders acknowledge that Lukashenko may still give the order to disqualify one or both of the remaining opposition contenders.)

¶3. (C) The latest Lithuanian Gallup polls (financed by U.S. NGO IRI) indicate that the name recognition ratings of "single" candidate Milinkevich soared from 59 percent in November 2005 to 79 percent in mid-January, and his popular support ratings went from nine percent in November to 17 percent in mid-January. (Note: Lukashenko's support ratings hover around 54 percent. Civil society leaders around the country dispute that Milinkevich's name recognition has reached 79 percent. They say that Milinkevich is only beginning to be a familiar name to voters.)

14. (C) Opposition figure Anatoly Kozulin chose not to participate in the single candidate process and launched his own presidential campaigns. Kozulin continues to receive low polling numbers -- less than 3 percent of popular support in the Gallup poll. However, the former state university rector and Social Democratic Party leader may appeal to Belarusians (and Russian backers) who do not like Lukashenko voters but support strong ties with Russia. Kozulin may also appeal to those who support gradual reform and fear Milinkevich is a Belarusian nationalist trying to rush Belarus into Western arms. Kozulin recently announced that he was against all "destabilizing activities" organized by some elements of the opposition.

15. (C) Although Milinkevich has offered to join forces with Kozulin, the latter seems intent on going alone or only under his single leadership. Suspensions continue that Kozulin, who once considered himself a Lukashenko protg, may be playing a double game for his old boss in trying to divide or buy the opposition.

#### Opposition Knows Elections Will Be A Sham

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16. (C) Both Milinkevich and Kozulin campaign teams view the elections more as a rare opportunity to establish contact with voters and broaden support for long-term changes. While they still hope for the best, they recognize the chances of a clear opposition election victory or a popular rejection of falsified elections results are remote. Many opposition and civil society leaders around the country lament that voters, in general, either know little to nothing about the

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opposition, accept the GOB view of the opposition as greedy, anti-Belarus insurrectionists, or are resigned to the belief that the opposition is incapable of ousting the regime.

#### Lukashenko Regime Still Strong

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17. (C) Lukashenko has been able to remain in power for 12 years. His staying power rests on several key factors:

-- Information Monopoly: The regime has successfully eliminated or severely limited independent media. TV and radio are solidly under state control and even Russian channels are censored. Belarusian state media focuses relentlessly on promoting Lukashenko's success in turning Belarus into a model of stable prosperity while crudely lambasting the opposition and the U.S. and western countries as failing states out to destabilize Belarus. There will be no public debate between Lukashenko and the other candidates; not even the names of opposition figures are mentioned in state media. Over the last few weeks, state media has devoted significant attention to the Third All Belarusian National Assembly, which is scheduled to take place in early March. The Assembly is taking on all the Soviet-style trappings of a pro-Lukashenko political convention. (See septel for details on the Assembly.) Judging from the media, one would not think a presidential election is only a month and a half away.

-- Loyal Security Forces: Lukashenko most recently stressed in a January 27 interview that, "if there is any bodily movement toward destabilization of our situation, we'll twist the necks of those who will do that and those who will encourage and finance(. Too much is at stake in these elections." The regime has put into law a number of measures aimed to prevent any kind of "colored revolutions" and security forces appear ready to execute Lukashenko's command to prevent protesters from even starting to gather. However, we have judged the security organs would not likely use

lethal force if significant numbers of Belarusians would actually succeed in entering the streets. (Note: See septel for a more detailed assessment of the likely GOB reaction to possible civic disturbances.)

-- Economic Growth and Stability: Even Lukashenko's opposition concedes that the economic situation in Belarus, based mainly on subsidized energy supplies from Russia and high world energy prices, favors Lukashenko staying in power. Belarusians remember the economic chaos of the 1990s, observe (through Belarusian state media) apparent economic turbulence in Georgia, Ukraine and Russia, and breathe a sigh of relief that their economy is not "unstable" as their neighbors'. Meanwhile, state media touts that in Belarus salaries are regularly raised and pensions are paid on time.

-- Russian Support: Putin's December 15 decision to continue providing Belarus with ridiculously low energy prices - USD 47 per 1000 tbc - confirmed for most Belarusians Moscow's support for Lukashenko's bid to stay in power. Moscow has refrained from any criticism of Lukashenko and has hosted him at high-level meetings in Moscow and St Petersburg, visually demonstrating to Belarusian voters their tacit embrace. Lukashenko knows most Belarusians believe Belarus cannot survive without strong ties with Russia. Russia may have gotten Lukashenko's agreement to sell Belarus' strategically important gas and oil pipelines as a quid pro quo for continued support, but the wily Lukashenko may succeed as he has so often in the past in evading paying back all his debts to Mother Russia.

-- Absence of a Viable Alternative: Despite its considerable progress in achieving greater internal unity, Belarus' political opposition has so far been unable to reach out to the broader population and project a realistic alternative to Lukashenko. Furthermore, the announcement of early presidential elections significantly reduced the opportunity for the opposition to develop its campaign. The opposition political parties present few new, fresh or diverse faces. Efforts by some civil society activists to develop popular street campaigns have garnered more foreign than domestic notice and support.

But Prospects for Change Also Strong

18. (C) Political and economic change in Belarus is inevitable over time, but a regime change in March appears

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highly unlikely unless Lukashenko makes a miscalculation that costs him popular, nomenclature, and/or Russian support, or if one of the opposition candidates start to "catch fire" with the public. The pillars underlying Lukashenko's regime are all subject to change. While appearing strong now, they could crumble if faced with a real external or internal challenge or some unexpected event.

19. (C) Lukashenko does not act like a confident man. He is increasingly isolated and there are indications that his economic "miracle" may not be sustainable much longer after the elections. Russia has already served notice Belarus will soon have to pay market prices for gas and oil and Belarusian products are starting to lose ground in the developing Russian market. Plans to broadcast independent radio and television programs into Belarus could impact the information monopoly the regime currently enjoys. The March elections could destroy the current generation of political opposition leadership but they might provide the opportunity for new faces and approaches to emerge to challenge a regime growing increasingly brittle and isolated in a dynamic, globalized region and world. Finally, Lukashenko, his circle and Russia know Lukashenko cannot last forever. He will have to focus at some point on his future and his legacy or face the inevitable fate of other authoritarian leaders who thought

they could ha  
ng on forever.

#### U.S.: Staying the Course

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¶10. (C) Belarusians have repeatedly thanked the United States for remaining a steadfast partner in promoting democracy in Belarus, but encourage us to maintain our commitment to Belarus even if the March elections fail to motivate enough Belarusians to demand change. The regime's policy of self-isolation and cruel political repression will eventually catch up to Lukashenko. Meanwhile, the U.S. should continue to work with its partners, especially the EU, in facilitating the inflow of independent information, strengthening civil society, and expanding contacts with Belarusian society, reaching out beyond the known opposition to the youth and the increasingly frustrated but vulnerable nomenclature. The U.S. should continue to shine the spotlight on Belarus before, during and after the March elections and encourage others to do so as well. The U.S. should also be wary of Russia's relentless efforts to bind Belarus yet more tightly in violation of Belarus' true sovereignty and independence.

Krol